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Voice of America  
Washington, D.C.  
March 29, 2022

Testimony before the U.S. Helsinki Commission hearing on Russian propaganda and censorship

Chairman Cardin, Honorable Members:

I'm humbled to speak before you today alongside such distinguished witnesses.

I testify in my personal capacity as a journalist whose work during the last eight years focused on identifying, verifying and debunking Russian disinformation, misinformation and propaganda.

Today, we see horrific and heroic stories from Ukraine, and I feel like I am experiencing a déjà vu – one that is somehow frozen in time. In fact, I have seen all of this before in the North Caucasus, which was Russia's testing ground for all types of weaponry, including propaganda.

I am Circassian, one of many oppressed and dying-off ethnic minorities in Russia. My people fought against Russia longer than any other country in the world. Russia won by killing and deporting more than 90% of the Circassians and destroying our homeland – exactly what the Kremlin is doing today in Ukraine. For Russia's non-Russian citizens, the hypocrisy is obvious. The Kremlin disinformation justifies war against another country by accusing it of the same policies Russia practiced for centuries.

What I've seen in fact-checking Russia is a propaganda Leviathan born of the symbiosis of modern technology with the inherited techniques and strategy of the Soviet Union. The Kremlin's coordinated operations use traditional media outlets, social media platforms and cyberattacks to bombard people inside and outside the country with specific messages, each designed for certain audiences.

In targeting domestic Russian audiences, the Kremlin deploys disinformation as entertainment. Watching Russian TV commentators is like following a soap opera. It's full of intrigues, with superheroes and supervillains who are being unmasked, judged, sentenced, and labeled for whatever purposes the Kremlin wants them to serve. Russian domestic propaganda does not shy of fabrications. It tells pure lies robustly and convincingly, conscripting every single foreign voice of support for the regime with translation and manipulated context, then delivering it to every single household.

In targeting foreign countries, Russia employs well-sourced, smartly designed and precisely targeted disinformation. A few years ago, we saw that the Kremlin's strategy was to promote complimentary views of Russia and the regime. Not anymore. Nowadays, the primary approach is destruction – of beliefs, ideas, values that the regime sees as an impediment or danger to its existence.

In Russian propaganda, the United States is forever the supervillain and chief target. When aiming at the American people, the Kremlin targets different sociopolitical, racial and ethnic groups with specifically designed disinformation. The ultimate goal is to destroy the U.S. from within. When selecting other foreign countries, the Kremlin seeks to plant mistrust and hatred toward everything American.

In too many places around the world, the Russian propaganda and disinformation keeps achieving its goals. We saw it during the 2016 U.S. presidential elections and in the instigation of anti-American sentiment on the African continent, the Middle East and some countries in Western Europe.

I believe Moscow's success comes from many factors, but the most important is that it is made to appeal simultaneously to the reasoning and to emotions, tapping both hearts and minds.

We witnessed the effectiveness of the Russian propaganda during the weeks leading to the full-scale invasion in Ukraine. Instead of believing facts on the ground, most of the world bought what the Kremlin wanted it to believe: that U.S. warnings were "hysterical nonsense," and Russia would never attack.

Until it did.

As for the power of propaganda in Russia, here is a story of my great grandmother, who was born into a noble, wealthy family. Her father, three brothers and husband died in the concentration camp in Solovki, where they were sent as enemies of the people by the Stalin regime.

My grandmother had six children; only one, the youngest – my grandfather – survived an artificial famine, similar to Holodomor in Ukraine, while the other five died of starvation.

When Josef Stalin died, she told me, quote: "I felt like the world was ending and some evil forces were about to attack us, and nobody was there anymore to protect us."

She said that everybody in her village, quote, "came out to the streets, and you could hear the sound of thousands of people crying in pure grief and great fear."

The Kremlin regime subjects the people of Russia to a life petrified in state-infused fears and beliefs based on falsehoods. This is one reason Russian society is lethargic, and the bulk of the Russian media remain an obedient servant, eager to please political power, instead of being the agents of truth, which is the ultimate purpose of journalism.

Thank you for your attention.